

## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON AMERICAN MUSIC TODAY

**Arnold Berleant**

American music is as various as the great sprawling country in which it originates. Like New York, the United States' largest city in which everything can be found, the very abundance of this music is overwhelming. Most non-musicians associate American music with its folk traditions and their derivatives. These include the regional music of the Appalachians and the Southwest, work songs, political songs, marches, patriotic music, the musical, and especially the Negro spiritual, the blues, and the many phases in the evolution of jazz. Of all these, jazz is probably this country's most original contribution and has had the greatest effect in the international musical scene on both popular and art music. It is important to mention that its principal formative influence has come from the black community.

The tradition of art music in this country, while not as original, is nonetheless persistent and vital. American composers have long gone to Europe to study, earlier to Germany or France, like Edward MacDowell and Charles Tomlinson Griffes and, in the mid-twentieth century in a stream of major figures from Copland to Bernstein, to Boulanger in Paris. At first their music did not exhibit a distinctive character. Like composers of other nationalities who studied in the cultural centers of western Europe, Americans embodied in their romanticism and impressionism the stylistic influence of their hosts. By the middle of this century that began to change, and some strands of American music began to assume a recognizable character of their own.

Yet that character, if it exists at all, is difficult to identify. The United States does not

have the homogeneous culture and univocal tradition of many European and Asian countries. The music of American composers reflects the diversity of regions and the multiplicity of cultural traditions that influence its varied population. Moreover, with the recent consciousness of ethnicity that has spread across the entire globe, that diversity has become more pronounced. This "great melting pot" of a nation has absorbed the varied influx of nationalities rather than assimilating them, and diverse cultural traditions and allegiances tend to persist. This process continues with the recent waves of immigration from southeast Asia, Latin America, and eastern Europe.

All this heterogeneity is displayed in American music. This music exhibits the entire spectrum of contemporary composition, from tonality and serialism to microtonality and electronic music. European influences persisted through the last half of this century from the presence on the American musical scene of such composers as Arnold Schönberg, Edgard Varèse, and Igor Stravinsky. The modernist movement has its representatives here, too, in figures like Roger Sessions, Milton Babbitt, and Elliott Carter. Both influential and popular is the music of Charles Ives, an idiosyncratic innovator who, early in this century, prefigured many recent techniques and practices. Romanticism remains vital in the work of Samuel Barber, whose music maintains its popularity. I myself tend to find a characteristic American sound in the tonalism, rhythmic vitality, and diatonic dissonances of Walter Piston, Aaron Copland, William Schuman, and Leonard Bernstein. American music characteristically displays a kind of freshness and exuberance that encourages an active engagement in the music by listeners as well as performers, something Ives explicitly strove for. But opinions and allegiances are as varied as the traditions and styles that composers here embrace.

It is not wise to attempt to judge these diverse practices but better only to acknowledge their influence. Probably the best course as a commentator is to mention some present trends and how I would like to see them develop, as we begin a new century with its psychological impetus to a fresh start.

Among recent tendencies, there seems to be a movement away from the rarefied complexities and hyper-rationality of post-Webernian serialism. New influences on music in this country have emerged and become prominent. Especially important here is Eastern mysticism and meditation, popularized by John Cage and now widespread, which has affected minimalism, aleatoric music, jazz, and even rock. Allied with this are Asian and African techniques, styles, sounds, and instruments, which have begun to join and even replace European ones. One form of this influence is found in the vastly expanded variety and use of percussion instruments. Furthermore, as with changes in the visual arts, American music is returning to a more conservative course, and styles that are accessible to a broader public have become popular. Among these is minimalism, as in the music of Steven Reich, Philip Glass, Terry Riley, and John Adams. Another is musical comedy, which has developed a large audience and grown both more substantive in content and musically innovative, particularly in the work of Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim. Other composers have retained tonality using essentially traditional sounds, styles, and forms.

Then there is electronic music. A fascination with new technologies is not limited to this country, but it is nonetheless a powerful influence on the American scene. The synthesizer is now a basic musical tool for many composers, and as it becomes increasingly user-friendly, it may be as essential to the composer as the computer is to the writer. While the synthesizer can

be used in combination with acoustic instruments, it allows the composer to dispense entirely with the performer, a change which holds great significance for the sociology of music, just as computer music-writing programs are changing the publishing process. The use of the synthesizer has also affected the way in which acoustic instruments are used. If sound reproduction technology develops to the point at which affordable synthesizers can shed the last vestige of electronic sound quality, its effects on musical composition, dissemination, and appreciation are incalculable.

My own hopes for American music lie partly in the stimulation that derives from its heterogeneity. Recent waves of immigration from Southeast Asia and Latin America have enhanced this still more. But it is not enough to provide a home for a diversity of styles. What this music needs is a synthesis of historical and present-day influences into a common yet rich resource. This is a proper role for art music, which need not be bound culturally to its ethnic sources but can both use and transcend them. Some of the most important composers of the recent past have done this, using yet rising above these national and cultural influences to a level whose force is wide and general. We see this in Prokofiev and especially in Bartók.

American music in this century has also reflected the national penchant for innovation and experimentation. These traits go hand-in-hand with a ready acceptance of scientific technology, joined with the powerful forces of commercialism and consumer culture that favor change for its own sake. Innovation has an obvious appeal, to composers as well as to audiences: It is easier to get first performances of new music than repeat performances. Yet while innovation is important for expanding musical resources, it easily becomes a substitute for intrinsic musical values. If the history of music were to be written from the standpoint of

innovation, Bach, Palestrina, and many others would hardly be noted. There is a subtle difference between innovation and creativity, and we should not confuse them. While these may be found together, they are not invariably conjoined. Unfortunately innovation is easier and so more widespread than creativity. It would be well to keep our attention fixed more firmly on solid musical values and not be seduced by the ephemeral appeal of innovation and its correlate, fashion. I would like, for these reasons, to see American music move away both from adherence to rigid doctrines and formulas and from an obsession with new technologies, innovative techniques, and exotic instruments. These last certainly have their place, but it should be a supplementary one, not the dominant force. The ultimate test of every art is how it works in appreciative experience. In music, the only criterion of artistic merit lies in its auditory effectiveness.

In writing about American music, I have obviously been speaking about musical life in the United States. Music in Canada has just as much claim to be designated "American," since that country shares the same North American continent with the United States. It is a mistake, however, to regard Canadian culture as a mere reflection of the nation that lies below its southern border. Traditions and influences are different in Canada, and the art there both distinctive, important, and distinguished in its own right. To review that situation requires a discussion of its own.

Finally, any assessment of the current musical scene inevitably reflects a single perspective among many possibilities. I hope this brief discussion of American music offers a plausible account of what is a varied and active musical culture.\*

\*I want to acknowledge with gratitude the comments of William Goldberg on an earlier version of this article.

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### OUTLINE

I. Review of present and recent trends in American music

II. Possibilities for the future of American music